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Andrew Jackson and His Northwest Alabama Interests
by Turner Rice

The name of Andrew Jackson is generally associated with the State of Tennessee and the national scene. Although books by the hundreds and articles by the thousands have been written about the man, there is scant mention of the part he played in negotiating Indian treaties which opened the vast Tennessee Valley to settlement, or to his land purchases and speculations in this area. Nor do historians tell of the many months that Jackson spent in what is now Alabama, other than as a part of his military campaigns. Few Alabamians realize that Old Hickory spent considerably more than a year, all told, in the state, much of that time in North Alabama.[1]

Repeated travels through the Alabama countryside whetted Jackson's interest in the potential of North Alabama for settlement. He was particularly impressed by the lands in the bend of the Tennessee on both sides of the river. The great watercourse, the fertile lands along its banks, the bluffs and tributary streams, all excited his imagination.

Before settlement could take place in this highly desirable area, the Indians had to be reckoned with. Aside from Madison County, then much smaller than it now is, all the rest of Alabama in the Tennessee Valley was firmly in the hands of the Cherokees and the Chickasaws. Their claims overlapped with no well defined boundaries between the tribes. Further, a treaty negotiated with the Cherokees in 1805 had cynically created a specific reserve for Chickamauga Chief Doublehead and two lesser chiefs. Doublehead's reserve extended from Cypress Creek on the West to Elk River on the East and had a depth of ten miles. Thus much of present day Lauderdale County, including the site of Florence, was included in a reserve for Doublehead and his relatives. The Chiefs of the Cherokee Nation soon learned that Doublehead had been secretly given this tremendous reserve as an inducement in obtaining his signature on the treaty, which had made important Cherokee cessions. It is said that a secret tribal council was held under Cherokee law and his execution was ordered. In 1807 this edict was carried out at Hiwassee Garrison in Tennessee, by a "committee" of three.[2]

Major General Andrew Jackson was the principal commissioner in negotiating treaties in 1816 and in 1817, which opened up large areas of Alabama. Jackson could be suave and diplomatic in

dealing with Indians, often addressing them as "Friend and Brother," but he could also be demanding and unyielding. Perhaps his real attitude with regard to Indian rights was exemplified in a letter to President James Monroe in March of 1817:

> I have long viewed treaties with the Indians /as/ an absurdity not to be reconciled to the principles of our Government. The Indians are the subjects of the United States, inhabiting its territory and acknowledging its sovereignty, then is it not absurd for the sovereign to negotiate by treaty, with the subject.[3]

General John Coffee, who was in charge of surveying the line fixed by the Creek Treaty of 1814 had run into trouble because of opposition from the Cherokees and Chickasaws. The problem involved overlapping claims by the three tribes in central Alabama. Coffee and his associates attempted to negotiate the respective claims at a meeting held at Campbell's Ferry, on August 12, 1816.[4] Campbell's Ferry, at the time, was located on the Tennessee River near what is now the North end of Wilson Dam, in Lauderdale County. It was at the end of a road leading from Pulaski, Tennessee, to the foot of the Shoals. A ferry carried travellers heading for Melton's Bluff and points to the South. Coffee's attempt to come to some agreement with the incensed Cherokees and Chickasaws was a failure. So discouraged was he that he decided to go home to Tennessee.[5] It became evident that it would be necessary to hold a full dress treaty session with the Cherokees and the Chickasaws, if the differences were to be reconciled. Inevitably, Jackson was called on to do the hatchetwork. Sensing that he would need to make some arrangements he wrote William H. Crawford, Secretary of War, that "it would be necessary to make some gifts," and from the official supplier, along with other necessities for the forthcoming meeting, he ordered "Two boxes of Claret" and "One barrel of Good Whiskey." The use of liquor was a standard operating practice in negotiating Indian treaties in those days.[6]

Jackson and his fellow Commissioners met with the Cherokee and Chickasaw delegations on the first of September 1816 in the neighborhood of George Colbert's stand and ferry on the banks of the Tennessee. The site was selected by both parties as a face-saving gesture. Jackson had wanted the conference held at Nashville, the Indians on their own tribal lands. Prolonged negotiations followed. By the 16th of September the small Cherokee delegation had agreed to Jackson's demands, subject to ratification by a tribal council at a later date. The more stubborn Chickasaws

held out until the 20th. It would have taken longer, had not the Commissioners overcome the resistance of several of the Colberts by creating sizable "Reserves" for them, as an "inducement." The best known of these "Reserves" was that conferred on George Colbert and his family. Located in western Lauderdale County, it covered several miles of riverfront, rich alluvial bottoms, and the north end of his ferry. Even today, plantations in the area are described as being in "The Reserve."

As a result of the Treaty signed in September 1816 with the Cherokees and Chickasaws, much of the Tennessee Valley was to be opened up for settlement, as soon as it was surveyed and mapped. General Coffee and his staff worked feverishly to accomplish this task.[7] In October of 1816, Jackson wrote Secretary of State Monroe (Monroe was to become President next year) from Nashville, outlining the provisions of the two treaties, the dollar payments involved, and urging:

> The sooner this country is brought into market, the better . . . . the vast capital that is now held up for the purchase of this land . . . . will bring into the treasury immense sums of money.[8]

He also cited the urgent necessity for the construction of a new road linking Nashville and the East with New Orleans and Mobile, as a defense measure. This would shorten the old route by way of Natchez by several hundred miles. Already the Secretary of War had notified Jackson that Congress had approved a niggardly $5,000.00 to build and maintain a road from Columbua, Tennessee, to Lake Ponchartrain.[9] General Jackson further urged the building of an arsenal, supply depot, and cannon factory at the foot of Muscle Shoals. He thought that this area was particularly advantageous because it was where the proposed military road would cross the Tennessee River.[10]

By December of that year Jackson had received approval of his idea for the building of the arsenal, cannon foundry, and supply depot, and had been instructed to recommend specific sites. He came up with proposed locations on Cypress Creek, and on Shoals Creek, both in Lauderdale County. The United States Engineers made extensive surveys of the sites in 1817, in 1823 and as late as 1828. In 1823 the Engineers made a strong recommendation for the building of the military installation on Cypress Creek, two and a half miles from its mouth, at the "Clopper's Mills."[11] The need for the arsenal decreased with the rapid settlement of Mississippi and Louisiana, and the project never got off the drawing

boards.

General Jackson lost no time in getting the Military Road project under way, and his instructions to the surveyors were short and to the point. They were to start at Nashville and proceed as nearly as possible on a line 20° west of south until they reached Madisonville, Louisiana. The road came up through what is now known as Jackson Hollow, in present day Sheffield, and then proceeded by way of "The Big Spring," across the mountain to Russellville, and Columbus, Mississippi. After a number of years, the ferry crossing was moved upstream to about where the old railroad bridge is located, but early maps show the Military Road crossing at the mouth of Cypress Creek.[12]

By late 1816 Jackson was taking a personal interest in the Muscle Shoals area which he thought had significant growth potential. In a letter to Coffee he mentioned that he was determined to buy for his own account strategically located lands, when they were placed on the market.[13]

In March of 1817, Jackson was writing newly inaugurated President Monroe, pressing for early sale of the lands acquired by Indian cession, and again emphasizing the importance of the military road and the arsenal.[14] In May, Jackson removed the last obstacle to the settlement of North Alabama, when he forced the Cherokees to cede Doublehead's Reserve to the United States. In August, in response to an inquiry by John Coffee, Jackson recommended specific sites for towns. Predictably, Jackson recommended:

> The points on the north and south side of the Tennessee River where the military road crosses the same. This is the point at which I have recommended a military depot to be established, and on both sides are good sites for a town. On the North the site is about a half mile from the river, at the head of navigation up Cypress Creek.[15]

By September, Jackson had become so enthusiastic about the new country that he and his long time business partner, John Hutchings, had acquired a large plantation from one Melton, an Irishman married to an Indian woman, a noted river pilot (some say "Pirate") and farmer. This place was located at Melton's Bluff, almost directly north of Courtland, across from the mouth of Elk River. The partnership proposed to raise cotton and corn and for that purpose put a number of slaves and an overseer on the place.[16]

During September Jackson visited Melton's Bluff. He wrote Coffee, still engaged in surveying, to bring with him, when he by, his surveys of several tracts, including that of Coldwater, or

Spring Creek township (Tuscumbia), because he was interested in the upcoming land sales.[17]

About this time John Hutchings became critically ill in Huntsville, where he was engaged in business. On October 22 General Jackson and Rachel rushed to Huntsville to be at the bedside of the dying Hutchings.[18] They took with them little Andrew Jackson Hutchings, who had been visiting them at the Hermitage. This was the beginning of a remarkable phase in Jackson's life. He promised the dying Hutchings that he would act as guardian for his six-year-old son, and raise him as his own. This deathbed promise Jackson conscientiously carried out, until the boy became of age in 1834. Altogether the Jacksons spent some six weeks in Huntsville at the home of Rachel's sister, Hutchings' mother. Young Hutchings went back to the Hermitage with the Jacksons, and spent much of his younger life there. As a teenager, and as a student, young Hutchings caused the Jacksons considerable grief, as did their adopted son, Andrew, Jr. As a young man, Hutchings lived with the Coffees in Florence, and eventually, in 1833, married Mary, oldest daughter of the Coffees. He learned farming, and moved to the plantation which Coffee had bought for him, on Jackson's instructions, at the 1818 land sales. This plantation was located on what was then the Coulter's Landing Road, but which is now known as the Gunwaleford Road, about four miles west of Florence. He was regarded as a successful planter, and Jackson was very proud of him. The General, an inveterate and voluminous correspondent, wrote young Hutchings at length through much of his brief life. These letters have been preserved and furnish an insight into the concern and love which Jackson had for his ward. The young Hutchings had two children to Jackson's great joy. By 1841 both Mary Coffee Hutchings and Andrew Jackson Hutchings were dead. Neither of their children had offspring.[19]

In late December of 1817, Major General Jackson was once more ordered away to fight the Indians. This time it was the Seminoles and Lower Creeks who were causing the trouble. The General was not happy with the timing, as the great land sales had been announced for January, February and March of 1818. They were to be held at the United States Land Office in Huntsville. He hastened to put his affairs in order, and left for Huntsville on the 22nd of January, detouring by his Melton's Bluff operation on the way.[20] From the 26th, when he reached Huntsville, until he departed several days later, he was a busy man. He attended to the legal affairs of his late friend. He also met with Coffee

and fellow Tennesseans who organized the forerunner of the Cypress Land Company to buy large tracts of land and townsites in the new country. He gave John Coffee written authority to buy designated lands for himself and for the Hutchings guardianship, after consultation with James Jackson then of Nashville who was financing his purchases. Then he was off to the wars, hastening to catch up with his troops who were ahead of him.[21]

By April 7th, Coffee had authorized, and James Jackson Company had advanced, a total of $5,445.81 for the downpayment on "6 quarter sections of land" and $430.00 for "8 shares in town of Florence." It seems probable that the amount includes the purchase of the full section for young Hutchings, previously mentioned, and an additional 160 acres for Jackson individually, lying to the west of Cypress Creek, near the Hutchings purchase. This tract would probably abut on the 30,000 acres adjacent to Cypress Creek which Jackson had envisioned as reserved for the munitions plant. James Jackson bought the rest of the section in which Andrew Jackson's purchase lay.[22]

The military operations being concluded, Jackson attended the lot sales in the new town of Florence, his own pet project. The sales in July exceeded the wildest hope of the promoters. Jackson became so infected with the speculative fever of the moment that he went overboard, and bought five lots for himself and one for his ward. He obligated himself to pay a total of $1,525.00 for his lots, which were located in an area bounded by Mobile, Pine, Cedar and Tombigbee streets, according to Sannoner's map. In 1827, at the time of the Cypress Land Company fire, he still owed that company $1,937.34, against which he had deposited 4 shares of the company's stock as an offset. Jackson's lot purchases were not notably successful. He sold one, gave one to a Coffee namesake, and in 1840, after prolonged effort to sell them, deeded the three remaining lots to Hutchings and his children for a total consideration of $240.00.[23]

Jackson was interested in numerous other speculative ventures. The promoters of the town of Marathon put on a lot sale on October 12, 1818. General Jackson was the first buyer. As a stockholder of the Marathon Land Company, whose property was on the site of the Jackson-Hutchings farm, adjacent to Melton's Bluff, the General was doubly interested. Marathon, unfortunately, never got off the ground and died a lingering death several years later.[24] Later the General was in Huntsville for the land sales on the south side of the river. On November 5, 1818, he made his prize

purchase, one on which he had had his knowing speculator's eye for a long time. He entered Section 33, township 3 south, range 11 west. Shortly thereafter he wrote General Isaac Shelby:

> I reached home on the 12th instant, having gratified my friends in the A/labama/ Territory by the purchase of a section of land south of the Tennessee on the Military Road between the river and the big spring. This section I bought at two dollars per acre, no person bidding against me, and as soon as bid off, hailed by the unanimous shouts of a numerous and mixed Multitude--This on the eve of my retiring from all public appointment.[25] (He obviously didn't mean it.)

If you will superimpose Section 33 of the third township, on a large scale map of present day Colbert County, you will see that Jackson's purchase runs down 2nd Street in Sheffield, for its northern boundary, and to the Tuscumbia city limits, just back of the Colbert County Hospital, on the South. Montgomery Avenue pretty well splits it down the middle. In 1821 Jackson acquired 578.57 acres of Section 32 which lies in Colbert County, immediately adjacent to Section 33, to the west, and including the south bank of the river at Spring Creek. This land lies squarely between General Coffee's pet town-to-be York's Bluff on the north, and Coldwater, later Tuscumbia, on the south. These two sections would appear to be the best speculation of the lot, but results were a long time in coming.[26] General Jackson immediately sent slaves and an overseer to clear the site and put it in cultivation. He attempted to farm the property for several years, with almost disastrous results. His overseers were all "villians" or worse, or "deceived him greviously." He attempted to sell the property at a profit for a time, and finally ended up selling it "on time" for what it had cost him, plus $1,000.00 for improvements he had put on the property.[27]

General Jackson's speculations in the Valley of the Tennessee did not turn out to be the bonanza he had expected. The panic which arrived in mid-1819 spared no one. Not even Jackson. He was head over heels in debt with his Alabama speculations. He strove to sell part of his holdings, to little avail. He rode to Florence to inspect the work on the Military Road. He ended up in Huntsville with the Alabama Territorial Legislature which passed a resolution in favor of Jackson for the Presidency. After this Jackson began shifting most of his attention to national affairs.[28]

Several years later Jackson made one more trip to the Muscle

Shoals area. In August of 1825 Jackson wrote Coffee that he was coming to Florence on a visit. All of Florence was impressed that the great Jackson was coming to visit. Elaborate preparations were made. On August 30, the Florence Hotel, the town's leading hostelry, located on the northeast corner of Court and Alabama Streets, was resplendent in fresh paint, flowers, and decorations. Never had the groaning board been so groaning, with every delicacy the local market afforded. Every prominent male in the town, dressed to the nines, was eagerly awaiting the hour of the banquet for the distinguished guest. On the appointed hour, between fifty and sixty of the leaders of the young town assembled in the dining room. Colonel Peter Armistead presided, assisted by Samuel Craig, Esquire. Food and drink were served. Particularly drink. A day or so later, Jackson was given another elaborate banquet by the citizens of Tuscumbia. And so, General Jackson's long love affair with the Valley of the Tennessee, reached a fitting climax.*[29]

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*This paper was presented by Turner Rice, at a meeting of the Tennessee Valley Historical Society, held in Sheffield, Alabama on October 14, 1973.

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